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Production, consumers' convenience, and cynical economies: The case of Uber in Buenos Aires

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Based on twelve months of fieldwork into Uber's conflict in Buenos Aires, Argentina, this article examines convenience's role in the emergence of what I call cynical economies: a method and logic of production expressly organized on the awareness of a distance the very rhetoric of convenience exacerbates. For the city's middle class, convenience defined a democratizing, empowering arena of private relations away from the hierarchies and exclusions proper to the private sphere. As Uber's ratings translated consumers' experiences into a political economy for the trade, drivers organized the production of the ride knowing that whatever exceeded the immediate intelligibility of the experience could not matter in that political economy. In the process, cynical economies delegitimize complex and inherently social categories like risk, responsibility, and liability, as well as the social sphere that frames them, without offering an alternative order in return.

Keywords Convenience; Cynicism; Uber; Buenos Aires; Political Economy

Convenience mobilizes several cultural, moral, political, and economic invocations and affects under a poetics of slickness, ease, and pragmatism. I see this special volume as concerned with the political economy, as it were, of such poetics: convenient to whom, why, at whose expense, in what sense, and in what terms? Here I take up the editor's invitation to reflect on how producers incorporate the convenience of others, namely, their actual or potential consumers, into their production processes and also into that which they sell. It is, in this sense, an ethnography of a manner of production and of selling what one has produced, which in this case is a service. I am concerned here with Uber rides.

The legal, political, and industrial conflicts Uber triggered in Buenos Aires, Argentina, when it arrived in April 2016 had a cultural counterpart, where the platform's confirmed or alleged convenience shaped the company's PR blitz and the middle class's enthusiasm in signing up for it as drivers and passengers. From the perspective of residents, this convenience combined structural and marketing elements provided by a key actor in the production of rides: Uber itself. The instant, near-universal access to its platform as a driver or passenger; driving when one wants (subject to quite particular terms and conditions, but the footnotes of this specific promise mattered less at the moment of novelty); and rating freely—convenience merged with the moralizing tonalities of empowerment and democratization/universalization of chances and voices, freedom to choose, and an ill-defined but immensely persuasive freedom tout court.

The city's middle class framed Uber's convenience in a cultural-economic opposition to the city's taxi industry. An exclusionary structure of licensing, standards, vehicle verifications, professional permits, and other bureaucratic and material hurdles monitored the latter much more intensely than residents imagined. Set by the city government

and taxi associations and union of taxi drivers, these mechanisms determined who drove and/or owned a taxi, how people would be included or removed from the trade, the price of the service, and, through perhaps unfairly discredited routes, how passengers could complain or seek redress after a problematic ride: adjudication took place in a public sphere.

Buenos Aires's middle class generally distrusts institutional public life in Argentina, and bureaucracies and unions particularly so (Lazar 2017; Muir 2016). Uber's immediacy, its performance of constant recalculation and individualized interface, did not just make it convenient; convenience was the cultural manifestation of a world of relations away from, and inherently antagonistic to, the public sphere's hierarchies of knowledge, capital, and monopoly over the order of things. To these people, what I called earlier the structural sense of Uber's convenience defined a private arena of relations that constituted a moral virtue and victory over the public order—that is, it was empowering, democratizing, and freedom generating—precisely *because* it was private.

If convenience ultimately hinged on Uber's capacity to transpose a public problem to the private sphere, the company was not the only actor producing rides. As is known, through executive, expedited rating, it is citizen-consumers and not the state, a union, or some law who decide who drives for Uber and what counts as a good ride. With the effective reduction of trade governance to the opinions and experiences of complete strangers fleetingly sharing the space of the platform and the car, drivers themselves now needed to figure out how to produce some sort of service that would ensure an average rating made of aggregated incommensurable private experiences above the threshold of 4.5 stars (out of 5). Drivers bought mints, created playlists, and performed celerity and industriousness—but also skipped mandatory vehicular controls and drove passengers around with the wrong kind of insurance (so, effectively, uninsured), engaging in a creative, strategic, performative work of production based on what drivers expected would be invisible, unintelligible, or inconvenient to access for the consumer and that therefore could never "count" in this political economy.

Beyond moral or ethical denunciation of self-interest and its strategies, I am interested in the intersection between the complicity with that distance from the consumer and the removal of the public sphere as a socially legitimate arena of adjudication. What does a political economy quite literally made of the aggregation of private experiences look like? What kinds of production patterns mark economic exchanges defined by consumers' convenience, in a sense a byword for the consumer's bottom line, in such literal and totalizing ways? How does what makes convenience a virtue exacerbate these patterns? I argue that the transpositions convenience enabled here consolidated what I call cynical economies: a method and logic of production organized on, and benefiting from, the awareness of a distance enhanced by the very rhetoric of convenience.

Defining cynics as those who "know very well what they are doing, yet they are still doing it" (Žižek 1989, 8), and building on recent ethnographic research on cynicism as a productive disposition toward action, cynical economies seek to capture the tone and nature of economic relations purposefully built on that distance. Increasingly common beyond platform and sharing economies in a late capitalism that has normalized consumer engagement through ever simpler, and more convenient, feedback interfaces, cynical economies have a particularly corrosive impact on the social and cultural legitimacy of public policy, in clunky contrast to the sleek, intimate instantaneity of what consumers think they understand. As convenience lubricates the shift from the political and public to the moral and private, cynical economies transform the grounds on which we understand responsibility, accountability, and liability: consumers become effectively responsible, accountable, and liable for aspects of relations deliberately constructed on the basis of an experience that is made to pass for a knowledge they may not necessarily have.

Cynicism as a kind of action, work as creation, and methodology

Cynicism is an enlightened false consciousness, Sloterdijk (1987) tells us—a disposition toward a particular kind of inaction. He is alluding to Marx's "false consciousness," whereby the oppressed do not fully grasp the conditions of their exploitation; otherwise, Marx argued, they would spring into game-changing action. In contrast, cynics know and understand what's what, but skilled in an enlightened "critique-as-unmasking" (Sloterdijk 1987, 22), they have "reflexively buffered" the falseness of any shared truth. Cynics *expect* politicians to lie, beauty standards to be technologically enhanced into unreality, and businesses' social responsibility projects to amount to whitewashing schemes before they are even launched. At home in the ever-accelerating aporia where the boundaries between information, advertising, panegyric, education, and entertainment have collapsed in a single marketplace (Jameson 1994; see also Gao 2016, 56), the cynic knows that virtue is effectively no better than its copy (Stanley 2007, 400) and sees exactly *how* the gap between the two ceases to matter. Because cynicism's reflexively buffered, no-nonsense truth dismisses the premise of actually shared virtue, it disparages the political as a public arena where other orders that could or should be are worth discussing. What can be is what is, here and now, and it is in this specific sense that cynicism is about inaction.

Broadly following Sloterdijk's political philosophy, Žižek casts cynicism as the triumphant ideology of a late capitalist kind of action. Yes, cynics are those who, in the totalizing logics of Jameson's marketplace, as Žižek (1989, 8) notes, "know very well what they are doing, but they are still doing it." But now cynicism's quest for the no-nonsense truth has converged with the logics of a bare, mercantile, neoclassical bottom line. Cynics do not just see that virtue and copy can be swapped—they act on it. The point is not to characterize cynics as a bunch of self-interested people but to understand the "realistic capitulation" and self-aware complicity with the faults in public, shared truth that enable cynics' creative potential to work with the status quo to perpetuate the condition of their victory (Stanley 2007, 390). According to Shea (2006, 314–22), already at the level of political philosophy, to understand cynicism's shift away from a cultural critique to, and of, the public and toward a private and specifically individual experience and disposition toward action, we must examine the strategic and creative repertoire on which the cynic draws to trade, thrive, and survive.

Ethnographic research emerging mostly from the political anthropology quarters already explores how cynicism's "doing" generates conditions for resistance, managing life in precarious or oppressive conditions, or for out-manipulating manipulators (Allen 2013; Hermez 2015; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Steinmüller and Brandstädter 2016). Even if the effective or even desired outcome is not necessarily a new political order, or explicitly political at all, this research emphasizes that cynicism's variegated panoply of opportunism, irony, transgression, and hypocrisy still creates and shapes cultural relations (Brandtstädter 2016, 122). This article brings this scholarship to bear economically through a study of how convenience lubricates the merger between cynicism's reflexively buffered no-nonsense truth and the logics of the bottom line.

To be clear, I am not concerned with customers and consumption in and of themselves or with determining whether producers "actually" understand what consumers want, feel, or perceive as convenient. I want to analyze how producers incorporated the logical and affective transferences convenience enabled, from the public to the private, within the work of producing the service of an Uber ride and within the ride itself. In this sense, my examination of the relation between cynical economies and convenience is watermarked by the call to shift attention away from consumption, instants of exchange and choice, to production processes, temporalities, and logics (Røyrvik 2011, 29; see also Reinert 2004). Within this subfield, too, I follow scholarship resisting the reduction of work to "labor" and the reduction of labor to a condition or an abstract, quantifiable "measuring rod for value" (Reinert 2007, 41). I emphasize instead work as the creative, productive, qualitative, volitive act and condition of a homo faber engaging with circumstances to create something new (Røyrvik 2011, 29–35).

These arguments are based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork into Uber's conflict in Buenos Aires. Uber was illegal, or at several courts at once, during all this period, which presented ethical barriers to either

driving for it or using it as a passenger. I registered on Uber's website to receive its newsletter and other documents produced by the company; attended the company's training sessions for new drivers; collected and analyzed fliers and promotional material; and interviewed Uber drivers, passengers, city authorities, taxi union officials, lawyers, and court clerks. I also analyzed transportation laws and followed the legal case through the judicial files uploaded to the government's portal.[1] My interlocutors all fit a socioeconomic definition of Argentine middle class: car owners and homeowners, university educated, gainfully employed, sufficient income to take either taxis or Uber cars regularly, and diverse in their gender and LGBTQI+ continua. I met them all early in my fieldwork as taxi users before Uber's arrival and followed them as Uber's arrival interpellated them as potential passengers and/or drivers.

The senses of convenience

Uber announced its "imminent" arrival to Buenos Aires in late March 2016, and by the time it went live on April 12, tens of thousands had downloaded its app. Within twenty-four hours, judicial authorities ordered the interruption of its services following legal action from the taxi industry, but Uber carried on. I did not own a car in Argentina and had no plans even to download Uber on account that it was illegal, but the company's induction sessions were open to anyone, consistent with the company's dictum that anyone could drive for Uber and "be their own boss," so I attended six of them.

Usually two Uber employees delivered the session's slides in a small conference room as supporting staff registered drivers on laptops set up at the back. The presenters were enthusiastic and the audiences usually welcoming, but the legal case against Uber advanced by the hour, supported by Argentina's newly elected president, right-of-center technocrat Mauricio Macri.[2] The City of Buenos Aires's government, part of his coalition, fined Uber drivers thousands of dollars for unlawful use of public space, lack of professional driving permits, and lack of professional transportation insurance. It also towed their cars away and withheld their driving licenses. Taxi drivers ambushed several Uber drivers per day, unexpected vigilante bailiffs in unprecedented cooperation with traffic wardens and the police.

Uber only required of its drivers a civil liability insurance policy (*seguro de responsabilidad civil*) and a standard driving permit; anyone driving his or her own vehicle in Buenos Aires, including a significant portion of the working classes, would already have both and was thus already ready to drive for Uber. I attended one particular session with Mariano, in his thirties, working part time as a graphic designer and comfortably included in Uber's lax driver selection criteria. Attendants that day were particularly fretful about the matter of insurance policies: someone insisted on the fact that it remained illegal to drive someone around for money without proper insurance and asked what would happen if he had an accident or was stopped by the police. Uber would have our backs, the presenters told us: the company had indeed been reimbursing all of its Buenos Aires drivers' fines.

There is only one kind of taxi in Buenos Aires, and it is classed as a public service. Strictly speaking, all taxi licenses univocally attached to taxi cars belong to the city-state, though they are tradeable among residents in exchange for a fee. Taxi drivers are unionized, and taxi owners are grouped in several chambers of commerce. The insurance policy, the driver's permit, and the price of the transaction itself were at the center of the legal case the taxi industry presented to argue, among other things, that Uber was engaging in unfair competition. Local and national laws mandated that anyone driving anyone else for money in Buenos Aires acquire a professional driving license, which is more expensive than a regular license, required longer examinations, and had to be renewed yearly as opposed to every five years. Also, insurance policies covering professional transportation of passengers, just as mandatory, were at least twice as expensive as civil liability policies. The rationality built into the price of the former involved the age and type of the vehicle, the driver's age, and driving history, like most other policies, but also considered estimates of likelihood of judicial action in case of accident and of the increased exposure to risk by

professional drivers, often taxis driving twelve hours a day. Also, taxi fares are standardized, universal for the whole of the city of Buenos Aires, and are set at collective hearings where all key players of the industry, including consumer organizations, negotiate a fare. These negotiations ensure that the fare, among other things, covers the cost of the dearer insurance policies (del Nido 2020).

These were only the most salient features of an economic relation, the taxi ride, constituted through the hierarchies, standards, and exclusions/inclusions of a shared public sphere. Taxi drivers and actuaries, city government officials, and taximeter setters — the public sphere historicizes and distributes responsibilities among them in a division of labor that reproduces their relations to each other and to the larger public space. By no means does this imply that these relations are conflict-free or that every single one of these duties and responsibilities were fulfilled to the right extent all the time, although the industry was far more controlled and orderly than most citizens gave it credit for. But the very existence of this public sphere politicizes the transaction as part of a distribution of roles, times, and spaces that exceeds the individual, unmediated experience of the here and now. It is within this distribution that responsibilities, liabilities, risks, and deviations from them make sense *to begin with*, fraught with tensions but public and shared: they are inherently social relations, especially in the legal and juridical constitution of Western and Westernized thought.

Shortly after Uber's arrival, Mariano and thousands of others were driving for it and in the company's terms of trade. Uber rides were similar enough to taxi rides for the service to pass for a realpolitik, no-nonsense version of a taxi service, yet different enough to pass for an economically and politically empowering, democratizing opposition to that same taxi service. Both its similarity and difference, its realpolitik sheen and empowering evocations, would come to inform the cultural convenience of Uber to the middle class. The publicly asked question of why Buenos Aires needed thirty-six thousand taxi licenses, taximeters, special insurance policies, and other barriers if Uber "worked" began the work of transferring the public, political problem of this particular economic relation to the grammar of individual preference in the private arena of what people want, or feel, or think.

Convenience: From public to private, from politics to choice

Why and how was Uber convenient to this middle class? Greater Buenos Aires is well connected: more than two hundred bus lines, seven subway lines, several intra- and interurban trains, tramways, and thirty-six thousand taxi cars move residents around it. Argentine middle and even upper classes commonly use any and all of these forms of transportation, which are very often faster and cheaper than using one's car. Against this background, Uber's officials framed the platform as an alternative, additional way of moving around: as its regional spokesperson told a famous Argentine journalist, people would combine Uber with subways, taxis, and buses in their daily commutes.[3] Uber's convenience was in this sense about enhanced choice for individual consumers and efficient, fluid circulation oriented to the needs of a consumer in a particular instant and place, an argument the company also deployed legally and across mass media to resist being framed as an unregulated taxi service.[4]

Uber's convenience, in this sense, represented and incarnated the bedrock of late capitalist cultures: the axiom, and by now intuition, of individual choice as a moral good and imperative (Carrier 1997). Developed societies concentrate the philosophical canon and material traces of this axiom and intuition; yet the rhetoric of empowered, enterprising, and sovereign selves who choose fuels a "near fanatical obsession" (Chhotray 2011, xvi) with an unmediated politics of individual's wants, needs, and choices in the developing world just as intensely. Middle-class Argentines mistrust national institutions, particularly since the 2001 crisis deepened Argentina's socioeconomic degradation (Muir 2016); they resent workers' unions, which they see as self-serving and morally bankrupt (Lazar 2017); and they decry the judicial system's conspicuous partiality to the government of the day (Helmke 2009). When the public sphere and its actors are fundamentally tainted, the axiom and intuition of unmediated choice offer a rhetorical and affective means not to heal but to bypass, or replace, that public sphere

and what it should be providing in principle or customarily. Convenience to these people was not just a perk: it was inherently emancipating.

Take, for example, people like Mariano, who never believed taxis were regulated or controlled in any meaningful way and saw in the slightest casual abuse by taxi drivers, like taking someone for a ride, evidence of deeper currents of institutional collusion proper to a public sphere co-opted by opportunism and indolence. I explained to him that following evidence of taxi drivers' misconduct collected by phone, e-mail, and other routes, the city was actually revoking a taxi license every two or three weeks. These were, after all, cumbersome (and, ultimately, inconvenient) routes for a service that happens on the go and would require passengers to remember car plates, license numbers, or other univocal forms of identification; but for someone who complained about taxi drivers with undiluted passion, Mariano had never even attempted to figure out how to place a formal complaint and dismissed my point, claiming any revoked licenses had more to do with industrial politicking.

At the level of cultural narratives, the political misalignment between the newly elected administration, "neoliberal," and an industry the middle class understood as unfairly protected by artificial monopolies only emphasized my interlocutors' conviction that the former's support for the latter's legal case was "all for show." In one version of what was allegedly "really going on," judges were in cahoots with the taxi union to keep Uber out for the sake of the taxis' alleged monopoly over a particular kind of transportation. Other versions, like Mariano's, claimed city and national governments had told judges to perfunctorily pursue the case as a temporary dam to contain in those heady weeks the potential for public violence that Paris, Rio, London, and Santiago de Chile had seen before Buenos Aires.

Residents understood that the hierarchies and distributions of capital framing the transaction of the taxi ride as a public problem did not, and could not, include their concerns and interests as citizens of Buenos Aires in general and as consumers of transportation in particular. Uber's platform created an order where citizen-consumers were interpellated directly and, as such, turned an iconic, disembodied moral entitlement to choose into a concrete, effective ability of sorting out what mattered and how. The first platform of its kind to arrive in Argentina, Uber brought with it the possibility of transcending a (however incomplete, intermittent, and exasperating) social-civic citizenship, where citizens are at least in principle equalized politically in the inherently social nature of their problems (Marshall 1992; see also Muehlebach 2012), bringing about an atomized, morally laden neoclassical citizenship where citizens are equalized with respect to individual choice and market experience.

It was thus that convenience lubricated the substitution of the private consumer's experience for the public as an arena of legitimate adjudication, hierarchization, and distribution of responsibilities. As said earlier, there was a structural sense to this convenience and to its moral traction, insofar as infrastructurally, virtually anyone among the middle class could drive for Uber. Yet, to the extent that drivers were only allowed to stay if their aggregate rating by passengers remained above 4.5/5 stars, the latter defined the reproduction of an economic logic where convenience, in the form of the neoclassical consumer bottom line, organized an entire political economy inherently inimical to the public sphere. In this political economy, Mariano's ability to drive each day depended on the accumulation of fundamentally nontransferrable, incommensurable, private and fleeting experiences of people who would spend minutes in his car and would most likely never see him, or his car, again—or from any other perspective or with any other intensity than the one allowed during those minutes from the back seat.

What the mints, the music, the showmanship actually stand for

Transportation is rife with technical complexities highly opaque to its consumers: an average citizen is unlikely to understand the full impact of a particular mechanical fault on bare life. Even if he or she did, the circumstances of consumption complicate consumers' capacity even to access this information, which is why these industries are subjected to monitoring by technical and hierarchical forms of knowledge in the public sphere. In April 2016, all Uber

required of its drivers was a five-door, 2009 or newer model vehicle with air conditioning and room for suitcases; regular insurance and driving permits as mentioned earlier; and assistance at Uber's informational sessions.[5]

Aimed at teaching people how to provide the service of an Uber car ride, these informational sessions were organized around how to ensure provision of a great passenger experience (therefore keeping driver ratings up and drivers in the trade). Organized as lists of bullet points, the recommendations included opening the door for the passenger; having water bottles, sweets, and cell phone chargers of various kinds at hand; noticing whether passengers wanted to chat, listen to music, or stay silent; and keeping the vehicle free of smells (including car deodorants in case of allergies). Uber's ratings worked simultaneously as evaluation and sanction (Rosenblat 2018; see also Thedvall 2015): "the system" would aggregate and average out ratings constantly, and should a driver's rating fall below 4.5 stars, "the system" would call the driver in for a training session before suspending his or her profile. After almost three weeks of Uber rides, Mariano's ratings were an impeccable 5 out of 5.

During Uber's first weeks in Buenos Aires, its thousands of aspiring drivers crashed the police website, where residents requested copies of their criminal records. Uber employees cleared several drivers manually, and for a good few days, Mariano drove people around without anyone knowing what that record contained (it was clean). None of his passengers inquired about it. Mariano's car seemed to be in correct mechanical condition, and it probably was, although he did not have it checked. He also missed a vehicular inspection, required of him as either a private driver or someone who drives others for money; he drove nonetheless. Two people casually asked him about certain mechanical aspects of the vehicle, according to Mariano more out of curiosity than out of anything visibly off, and one of them with a view to becoming an Uber driver herself. He told them the car had been given the go-ahead by Uber—strictly speaking, the truth. To someone sitting in the back of his car for the length of a ride, the car was comfortable, clean, and moved like a car should.

Passing meaningful judgment on the mechanical condition of the car, or on Mariano's legal suitability to be a driver (or even imagining any kind of effective judgment could include meaningful considerations of the mechanical condition of the car or of Mariano's legal suitability), would have required a proximity with Mariano's car or an awareness that the questions needed to be asked were not available, awkward, or simply not done. As the complexities of production enabling the ride receded from the intelligibility of those whose "experience" counted, the instant of consumption became what the "experience" was about. Most of Mariano's fares were yuppies, university students, and young couples, a demographic subset the music selection of a proud, knowing child of the mid-1980s straddled perfectly. "You suss them out as they come in the car, greet them, ask them how they're doing, confirm where they're going, ask them what music they like. Get a sense of whether they want to talk, offer them chargers and water, mints, etc." (Mariano, interview, May 2, 2016). Things like evidence of the vehicular verification, or whether it even had happened or not, did not count toward this bottom line because none of Mariano's passengers thought of making it count: here merged the no-nonsense truths proper to cynicism and the logics of the neoclassical bottom line, strategizing jointly the gap between what counted and what really counted *without seeking to bridge it*.

Algorithmic management mechanisms that depend to such an extent on individual input tend to create an environment where the provision of a service and its sanctioning constitute each other through a circular rhetoric (Hodžić 2013, 101). However useful, practical, and convenient, the point of the mints, phone chargers, and water bottles was not to hide, or distract from, the lack of proper insurance or vehicular verification. It was also not to imagine or even present them overtly or literally as equal, analogous, or somehow commensurable with a right insurance policy or vehicular verification. Together with the music and the curated silences, they are part and parcel of a strategy and process of production oriented to what Mariano interpreted "actually" counted, or could be, through his showmanship, made to count, so that he could carry on driving. After all, the fact that there are no limits as to what can count as part of that experience, but also how and to what extent, was precisely what in the eyes of the middle class made Uber's platform convenient.

Mariano's success was in understanding how the transferences convenience enabled from public to private brought about a political economy that could not be such in the same sense as the one it was culturally competing against—or in other words, in understanding *how* that which did not matter to this bottom line could in a sense not matter at all. We see in Mariano's actions and approach to his economic relations what I call here cynical economies: a method and logic of production organized on, and benefiting from, the awareness of a distance from the consumer that the latter cannot see and that the very rhetoric and infrastructure of convenience obscure.

Of course, in any market exchange, consumers' preferences play some role in determining what is produced and even how, as evidenced in the rise of fair trade and other moral economies (Mahoney 2017). Also, providers playing with consumers' perceptions of the commodity or of the terms of exchange, or abusing information asymmetries, have always existed (Appadurai 1986). But a certain aspect of platform economies' relations creates exceptional room for the logics of cynical economies. As Granovetter (1985) argues, even in the most canonically perfect market exchange, parties try to embed the transaction and its terms into extramarket features: trust, patience, reputation, and other behaviors "socialize" the exchange to minimize abuses. Even exchanges among high-flying stock brokers tend to be embedded in a sociality that manages the potential for either side to take the other for a ride. This socialization happens over time, among a recurrent pool of participants and within the frame of the public sphere that also deters abuses, particularly legally codified ones.

Car rides in a city of 13 million are as anonymous, fleeting, and transient as a transaction can be; the only thing pinning producers down in Granovetter's sense in this case is the rating mechanism. But the consumers' bottom line that makes the platform convenient is also the only thing keeping producers in line. It is, too, what excludes the public sphere that would normally make sense of economic relations and pin Mariano down in ways that matter, for example, lacking proper insurance coverage. Inside the platform, there is nothing other than the consumer experience to sort these bodies in the way the public sphere would. The problem is that these ratings, however convenient, are wholly unable *actually* to embed the experience—to render it public in a political way. The transformation of a particular experience into an identity, into what *is*—in this case, a ride—removes that experience from its history and its part and place in a shared context that made it intelligible (Ahmed 2004, 59): it depoliticizes it. That experience can no longer be approached as part of a question concerning a public problem *precisely because its virtue was not to pay dues to the terms of the public sphere in the first place*.

To the extent that "experiences" as fundamentally different in principle as a song, a phone charger, and one's driving skills are aggregated arithmetically "like icons piled on top of each other" (Verran 2012, 118) and determined who could and could not drive, they have replaced a political economy with the infinite meaninglessness of a collection of incommensurable instants. It is only in the terms of this epistemologically empty, crowded lot that a bottle of water and an insurance policy can replace and pass for each other without even needing to be produced as equals, or even as remotely commensurable, and it is this that the mints, the music, and the showmanship ultimately stand for—what Mariano actually knew.

The scales of cynical economies and Uber as producer

I have defined cynical economies as a method and logic of production organized atop, and benefiting from, a gap between the effective conditions of production (what is actually happening) and the effective conditions of consumption (what can actually matter). I have also argued that the convenience of those on the consumers' side enhances the surplus producers can capture from exploiting that gap. Effortlessly histrionic and with bills to pay, Mariano was a consummate showman, but what interests me here is less the potential for malice or outright deceit than the circumstances that reproduce, normalize, or even require the exploitation of that gap; in other words, I want to examine now the circumstances where cynical economies thrive as the main, only, or preferable logic of

production well beyond car rides and well beyond platform economies. To fully understand these circumstances, we will have to return to convenience and to the fact that the proximity to the self it has evoked so far—emancipation, empowerment, individual choice—is always accompanied by a kind of pragmatism, an impatience in which, in the broad strokes of a flight for the bottom line, the copy works pretty much as well as the original.

Mariano may have known that the unexpected availability of a free water bottle could nudge or charm passengers into doling out 5 stars, but he was not driving with an unsuitable and cheaper insurance policy to cut corners, to persuade, or for the thrill of a con. Even if he had wanted to pay for a commercial transportation insurance policy and not break the law at least in that specific respect,[6] Uber's prices and pricing model made doing so unsustainable: he would have lost money just by existing as an Uber driver. Deciding whether Uber's pricing and policies were purposefully set up at a level so low as to undercut competition that it incidentally also put certain insurance policies beyond reach of its drivers is beyond the scope of my ethnographic material. What matters here is that Uber's policies were what they were, and with respect to them, Mariano was also a consumer, as was every other Uber driver in Buenos Aires, who accessed the infrastructure Uber produced in take-it-or-leave-it terms of engagement, most notably prices and pricing, labor management, and financial practices. The counterpoint to the no-nonsense logics of empowerment and choice analyzed earlier is the bottom line that drivers can simply leave if they want to. After all, this no-strings-attached pragmatism was precisely what made Uber convenient all along.

Mariano's cynical economies are thus embedded in a network of relations and calculations beyond his own such that, in some important senses, he had no choice but to work the gap between the fact that he was effectively driving uninsured, on one hand, and that, according to his ratings, this effectively did not matter, on the other. Many drivers, from this perspective consumers of Uber's platform, did have their cars towed and were fined the Argentine equivalent of US$4,130 for a sum of contraventions including, among others, the lack of proper insurance policies.[7] In all cases I heard of, Uber kept its promise of reimbursing all fines its drivers incurred while driving for it, and cars were eventually returned to their owners.

Argentine labor legislation does require that employers take care of the consequences of their employees' behavior in case of damage, harm to others, or other violations of codes of conduct.[8] But at the time, and still today, in both courts and marketing stunts, Uber resisted recognizing its drivers as employees, describing them instead as associates.[9] Covering the cost of these fines did not imply a recognition of a labor relation invisibilized until then through other means: it made the problem go away as part of a production strategy of showing that Uber "had our backs," as we had been told at the informational session, and that also included exhorting drivers to carry on driving and promoting its business despite direct judicial instructions to cease and desist (see del Nido, forthcoming).

Beyond questions concerning the ethics of Uber's business expansion model, both in terms of inciting its drivers to commit contempt of court and repaying those fines indiscriminately as a strategy to show support, what matters here is that the whole point of the fines is that they are counterpart to a private violation of the public sphere and its terms—irrespective of the amount of the economic sanction and of the capacity of the violator or anyone on his or her behalf to affront it. The notion that the company "had our backs" and the encouragement to keep driving both bank on and reinforce the silenced gap between the transgressional violence of the contravention and the economic sanction that represents it. Uber not only engaged in cynical economies as a method and logic of production but did so in ways completely unrelated to its condition as a producer of a platform economy. In the meantime, the merger between no-nonsense truths and the logics of the bottom line—or, put differently, the merger between the fact that people were using Uber anyway and the fact that Uber could in all evidence pay and afford to stay—reduced the political question of Uber's place in the shared public sphere of Buenos Aires to the terms the company created for itself, banking on a gap between the fact that it can pay for the fine and the point of the fine in that public sphere. After all, as Mariano argued, people were using Uber anyway, and if his car were towed away, he would get it back: in the pragmatics of the bottom line, of the one-way-or-another, he would not have to pay the fine.

Reducing the fine as social sanction to an economic exchange and reducing what counts in providing transportation to a meaningless aggregation of experiences are different problems, but both show how cynical economies thrive on a distance they never seek to bridge insofar as, in the pragmatics of the bottom line, Uber undeniably did have these drivers' backs, and passengers did not care about insurance policies during their rides. This is no surprise: as said in the beginning, cynicism is about a knowing that does not seek change but that, for reasons of opportunism, cheek, economic survival, or all three, works on that slippery distance between the point of the fine and the capacity to pay it, between knowing that the ratings cannot mean anything and knowing what they can pass for.

Conclusion

Each generation sees cynicism as the mark of its time (Shea 2006; Stanley 2007), a warning we might well offer to Žižek himself. But without further examination, and even if it were indeed the case, this remains a poetic truth about the human condition or about how those humans imagine a certain kind of opportunistic decadence. The questions remain, what kind of shape would cynicism take in our times in economic terms, and what would thinking through cynicism allow us to see? In this article I have argued that the answer lies in understanding how late capitalist economic relations are oriented toward the convenience of an informed, sovereign, independent consumer self whose pragmatic empowerment as a moral imperative is quite difficult to dislodge. By definition a private experience and affair, this convenience still inhabits a landscape of relations defined in another sphere, public and political, ironically developed at least philosophically and in principle to protect the concept and incarnation, however fragmented, of the modern individual. In this public arena, responsibilities, liabilities, and their deviations follow rules of adjudication that may be unfair or frustrating but that normalize and engage those individuals in a fungible, recognizable, shared grammar that cannot ontologically be reduced to the linear sum of a majority, or even all of its individual parts.

Thinking through cynicism in general and through cynical economies in particular helps us understand how the obsession with what people want, feel, or think, unique in its intensity to our times and exacerbated in the peripheries of the West, interacts with a public sphere that was never designed to accommodate atomized convenience — or even to make sense of it, for it would be a contradiction in terms. As I have shown through the production of a service as legally, technically, and culturally complex and as opaque in important ways to consumers as a car ride, cynical economies capture how this contradiction is neither resolved nor evacuated but capitalized in the no-nonsense, bottom-line merger of virtue and copy, of what matters and what actually matters, of the *longue durée* temporalities and tonalities of an insurance policy and the instantaneity of an exchange that cannot make sense of that policy or lack thereof.

I have defined production generously and work as a creative endeavor to emphasize that what is at stake is not a theoretical reworking of self-interest or a sanctimonious takedown. The point is to capture an increasingly normalized, and at times inevitable, logic of inhabiting economic relations that is confined to neither goods nor services and that, while particularly well exemplified by Mariano's work and Uber's actions in Buenos Aires, vastly transcends the universe of platform economies. What makes these relations important to us is not that they challenge virtue, or insurance policies, or the ethical good of not breaking the law but that they bet against them in the turf of a pragmatic bottom line that can never offer a grammar, never mind a shared, socially viable one, to accommodate in the terms of the self and our convenience, which belonged somewhere else to begin with.

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Notes

1 Judicial files were available at http://www.ijudicial.gob.ar.

2 See, for example, https://www.perfil.com/noticias/politica/uber-macri-defendio-a-los-taxistas-dijo-que-son-un-simbolo-20160414-0026.phtml.

3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkgWtW9oZaU.

4 See, for example, https://www.infobae.com/2016/04/12/1803941-uber-le-contesto-al-gobierno-las-multas-no-corresponden-porque-el-servicio-es-legal/.

5 See a full list of requirements at the time at https://www.lanacion.com.ar/buenos-aires/taxis-vs-uber-nid1884034/.

6 As of 2020, Uber provided an insurance policy that fits the requirements of Argentine law concerning passenger transportation for money, but in its early days, it limited itself to declaring that it would look after its "partner drivers."

7 https://telefenoticias.com.ar/actualidad/la-ciudad-secuestro-el-primer-auto-de-uber-y-podria-multar-al-chofer-con-77-mil-pesos/.

8 Law 24.557 on labor risks outlines these provisions: http://servicios.infoleg.gob.ar/infolegInternet/anexos/25000-29999/27971/texact.htm.

9 See, for example, https://www.uber.com/ar/es/drive/buenos-aires/.

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